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Theorizing Mankeeping: The Male Friendship Recession and Women's Associated Labor as a Structural Component of Gender Inequality

Angelica P. Ferrara and Dylan P. Vergara
The Clayman Institute for Gender Research, Stanford University

Many men's social support systems are romantically centered, with fewer men than women reporting regular emotional disclosure and intimacy outside of heterosexual romantic bonds. The field has not yet reckoned with the ways that shortcomings in men's social networks may further instantiate women's disproportionate emotion work on men's behalf. The current article theorizes an increasing and unequal dependency on close bonds with women in response to the decline of men's social networks through a discrete form of gendered labor we call *mankeeping*. Specifically, *mankeeping* is defined as the labor that women take on to shore up losses in men's social networks and reduce the burden of men's isolation on families, the heterosexual bond, and on men. Three testable postulates scaffold this theory that (a) women tend to provide increased emotional support to men who do not have it elsewhere, (b) women's provision of this support is a form of labor, and (c) women experience a burden on their time and well-being when this labor is not equally reciprocated. *Mankeeping,* a new extension of Carolyn Rosenthal's theory of *kinkeeping*, is framed in relation to the future of men and masculinities research to advance a fuller understanding of the impact of men's changing social networks on society at large.

Public Significance Statement
Over the past 30 years, studies in places like North America and Europe show that men's social networks have shrunk significantly in comparison to women. Fewer close relationships between males may cause some men to rely heavily on relationships with women, specifically romantic relationships, for emotional support in ways that are not always fully reciprocated. This theoretical article argues that a decline in men's social connections may increase the work women exert to support men through a phenomenon we call "mankeeping." Mankeeping refers to the efforts women make to compensate for men's thinner social networks, which can strain their time and well-being. Naming and understanding this dynamic is crucial for disrupting the broader societal impacts of male social networks that are not emotionally intimate and supportive.

Keywords: friendship, social networks, men, masculinity, gender inequality

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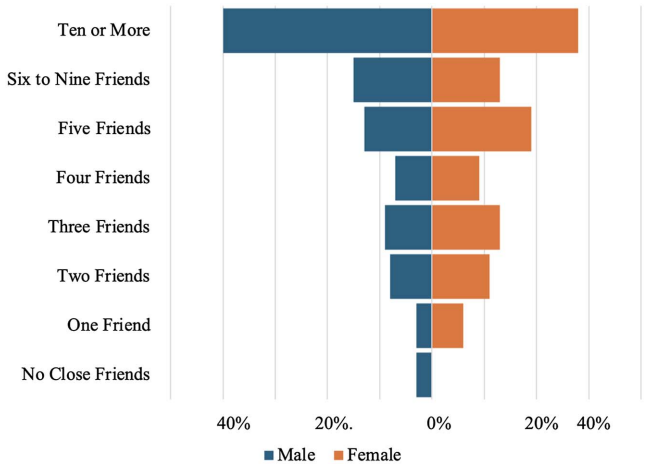
A variety of global research reports suggest that the size and quality of men's social networks has declined disproportionately in relation to those of women in the last 30 years (Cox, 2021; Gallup Organisation, 1990; Figures 1 and 2), and that the decline of male social circles has global relevance, particularly within rich, highly industrialized regions of the world referred to as the Global North. In the United Kingdom, for example, research commissioned by the men's mental health nonprofit Movember finds that 27% of men from a census-representative sample report having no friendships, and that 47% of the same sample report that they are unable to confide in a friend about a problem (Movember, 2018). The Global Research Report of Male Social Connection carried out across the United States, Canada, and Australia finds that 51% of men in these nations lack a friend with whom they can disclose emotionally. Collectively, these data have been referred to as a "male friendship recession" (Ipsos Mori via Movember, 2019). With few exceptions (e.g., Maes et al., 2019), a broad range of large-scale, census-representative, multinational quantitative and qualitative studies demonstrate that men are uniquely at risk for loneliness and social isolation in comparison to women, and that men's social networks are more dependent on women for social support than women's networks are dependent upon men (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Barreto et al., 2021, 2022; Campos-Castillo et al., 2020; Dinic, 2021; Goddard, 2023; McLaughlin et al., 2010). Men and masculinities scholars must interrogate how the effects of these trends, while troubling for men themselves, may cascade beyond men.

Increasing social isolation and loneliness has only recently been highlighted as a gendered social phenomenon. Among the general population, social disconnection of various types and its risks for poor physical and mental health have been a concern throughout the Global North for some time within the academy, governments, and in the public eye (e.g., Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Leigh-Hunt et al., 2017; Teo et al., 2013; Tunçgenç et al., 2023; United States Surgeon General's Advisory Report, 2023). The topic of shrinking social networks among Americans was brought to widespread public

Angelica P. Ferrara https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9289-4202
Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Angelica P. Ferrara, The Clayman Institute for Gender Research, Stanford University, 589 Capistrano Way, Stanford, CA 94305, United States. Email: angelicaferrara@stanford.edu

Figure 1

Number of Americans' Close Friendships in 1990

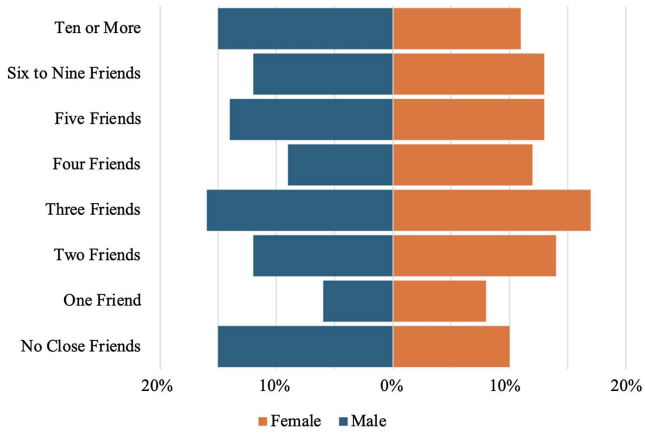


Note. Data was obtained and reproduced from The Survey Center for American Life and Gallup. 1990 data comes from the Gallup News Service Poll conducted via telephone in January 1990 with 1,226 American adults. 2021 data comes from the May 2021 American Perspectives Survey conducted for The Survey Center for American Life by Ipsos Mori with 2,019 American adults. Both surveys asked respondents "Not counting your relatives, how many close friends would you say you have?" Respondents were purposefully not given a definition of the term close friend. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

awareness through political scientist Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), where he argued that decreasing participation in social infrastructure such as churches and clubs would result in an unprecedented expansion of political polarization and loneliness. Many of the book's warnings came to pass in the 20 years that followed its publication (e.g., Klinenberg, 2018), but only in recent years have researchers made clear that Putnam's crisis of declining social networks has been realized disproportionately among men (e.g., Cox, 2021). Most have yet to reconcile with the ways this phenomenon is likely to increase the labor that women expend on men's behalf. Putnam himself hinted at women's disproportionate role in maintaining men's social networks in a recent *New York Times* interview where he was asked how he pursues social connection in his own life. "That's a really embarrassing question," he responded. "I write about and talk about the importance of connections, but my wife actually does it. She is actually the one who joins everything" (Garcia-Navarro, 2024). Putnam's response, which suggests not only a difference in quality between his and his wife's social networks but also a potential facilitation of his own social network through his wife, is exemplary of the larger cultural and empirical landscape to which our theory responds.

Figure 2

Number of Americans' Close Friendships in 2021



Note. See Figure 1 note for data sourcing and methodological information. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

This article interrogates what men's greater levels of social deprivation mean in relation to women and to gender inequality at large. If a growing proportion of men lack physically and mentally vital sources of social support, what might the cascading effects be on the time, autonomy, and well-being of the women with whom men are most intimately connected? To answer these questions and set forth an agenda for the future of the field, we briefly demonstrate gendered features of social networks and how these features are likely to contribute to men's unequal reliance on women for social support. In the second portion, we describe how men's thinner social circles may lead women to experience their own emotional and temporal burden through labor that shores up men's lack of diverse and supportive bonding structures (i.e., Umberson et al., 2020). Specifically, we propose that this burden can be conceptualized as an extension of women's *emotion work* (England & Farkas, 1986; Erickson, 1993) and *kinkeeping* (Rosenthal, 1985) that is suited for today's particular gender order defined by feminist scholars as the invisibilized labor that women undertake in order to maintain harmonious social ties and support the mental health of others (England & Farkas, 1986; Erickson, 2005; Rosenthal, 1985). This lays the groundwork for our theoretical contribution of *mankeeping*, which we define as the resulting labor that women take on in order to shore up losses in men's social networks and reduce the burden of men's isolation on families, the heterosexual bond, and on men themselves. Though we argue that mankeeping can take place between various cross-gender bonds, such as mother to son or male friend to female friend, we propose mankeeping as a component of patriarchy's persistence within the heterosexual bond, asserting that an unequal distribution of social support is part and parcel of the everyday social reproduction of gender inequality. The final portion of the article details pathways for future research and application surrounding the ideas we advance.

Gendered Features of Social Networks Facilitating Mankeeping

Drawing from research with populations in the Global North, primarily the United States, United Kingdom, Western Europe, Canada, and Australia, a body of evidence across sociology, psychology, gender studies and public health suggests that men's networks may translate into emotion work on women's behalf through a lack of sufficient social support beyond relationships with women who are their partners, family members, and friends. Gender comparisons

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of social network composition demonstrate that men tend to rely on other men less frequently than women rely on other women. In the United States and United Kingdom, women's friendship networks are more likely to consist of other women than men's are to consist of other men (Dinic, 2021; Goddard, 2023). Men's social networks, defined as those with whom one discusses important matters, are markedly more likely to include their wives, whereas women are more likely to list their friends or other family members as primary figures of social support—though the leading studies in this area tend to be dated and focused on White and older adults (e.g., Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Fuhrer & Stansfeld, 2002; Liao et al., 2018; Lowenthal & Haven, 1968; Veroff, 1981). Recent studies with more diverse samples suggest the inference may be stable across groups and over time (e.g., Campos-Castillo et al., 2020; Cohn-Schwartz & Schmitz, 2024). Complementary findings show that the loss of a romantic partnership is associated with a decline in the size of men's social networks, but not women's (McLaughlin et al., 2010). The health-promoting protective effects of diverse social networks *containing more than one individual* have been well-documented (see Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Litwin & Shiovitz-Ezra, 2011; Rafnsson et al., 2015). On average, women are more likely to cultivate a large network of contacts beyond romantic partnership with whom they can rely on for matters of varying importance and depth, whereas men's networks tend to be smaller, less emotionally disclosive, and more likely to include a romantic relationship as the primary support figure (e.g., Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; McKenzie et al., 2018; McLaughlin et al., 2010; Szell & Thurner, 2013). This empirical backdrop renders questions about men's disproportionate reliance on women for social support legitimate.

Looking at features of social networks beyond size and gender composition can also shed light on the degree of cross-gender support that men may seek out from women. When assessing qualitative indicators of the strength and depth within American's social networks, the Survey Center for American Life finds that within a typical week period, 41% of women report receiving emotional support from a friend compared to 21% of men—a finding that was stable across age. Similar 20-point percentage gender gaps exist for having shared a personal problem with a friend or telling the friend "I love you." Men tend to be less satisfied with the support they receive from friends than women are, but studies measuring social support satisfaction tend to be dated or focused exclusively on older adults (Jones, 1991; McLaughlin et al., 2010). However, in recent studies of racially diverse adolescents, boys report that they have a more positive experience sharing problems with girls than they do with other boys, and tend to rely on girls for discussing problems more than girls do with boys (Borowski & Rose, 2022; Rose et al., 2016). Other work shows that girls anticipate that sharing their problems with other girls will make them feel cared for and understood, whereas boys are more likely to anticipate that doing so with other boys would make them feel "weird," or that they are wasting time (Rose et al., 2012). Similar findings have been documented with adults, such as McKenzie et al.'s (2018) life history study showing that male participants make distinctions between male and female friends, choosing to disclose their personal problems with women while enjoying stereotypically masculine activities with men. A lack of reciprocity in cross-gender problem sharing may foment women's sense of burnout or frustration with men's emotional needs, though this remains untested.

On average, what is "normal" within women's same-gender bonding structures is rarer within men's, which could render women as "safe" confidants when men are looking to disclose personal matters without risking the loss of masculine status. Specifically, intimate discussion of personal troubles (Migliaccio, 2014), physical displays of nonromantic affection (Vierra et al., 2023), and nonactivity oriented companionship all have a higher degree of frequency and normality among the types of bonds that women build. That such cultivation and maintenance of intimacy is normalized, regularly practiced, and even praised within women's friendships with others (e.g., Rose & Rudolph, 2006) creates fertile ground for inequality within cross-gender bonds, making it possible that some men may find relationships with women supportive in ways that male friendships do not stereotypically provide, a position that McKenzie et al. (2018) have evidenced.

Difficulties with making or maintaining close bonds between men is not attributable to biological gender differences but instead to stringent ideological barriers that men face in the formation of nonromantic social ties. A half-century of research on primarily heterosexual men's friendships demonstrates that dominant masculine norms disincentivize boys and men from investing in and developing the skills to maintain rich, supportive same-gender friendships (Nardi, 1992). In a recent metasynthesis of the literature on barriers to closeness within men's friendships, Vierra et al. (2023) identified quintessential masculine directives of homophobia, toughness, and emotional stoicism as antithetical to the process of developing intimacy with another person, specifically someone of the same gender. Campos-Castillo et al. (2020) found, for example, that men who endorse dominant norms of masculinity are more likely than men who reject such ideas to report lacking friends or familial confidants with whom they can rely on for support. Although not all women are supportive of men's vulnerability, subverting dominant masculine norms through sharing vulnerabilities with other men is often met with ridicule (Oransky & Marecek, 2009; Pascoe, 2005) or apathy (McKenzie et al., 2018). While it is true that men often display affection and intimacy with other men through "shoulder-to-shoulder" activities and joking, these methods are typically insufficient in meeting men's social support needs (Martin et al., 2003; Migliaccio, 2014). Such deficiencies in intimacy may explain greater proportions of women in men's social networks (Dinic, 2021; Goddard, 2023).

We should be clear that despite the documented differences between men's and women's social network composition and depth, (a) there is no compelling evidence to suggest that men have different or lesser needs for social support than women and (b) many men do not conform to the pattern we describe. Indeed, many men cultivate active and supportive social networks that are not unequally dependent on women. Humans, regardless of gender, have evolved for complex social contact and interdependence, with leading scholars in the field referring to the desire for close relationships as the "fundamental human motivation" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Way et al., 2018). Developing a rich, multinode, emotionally supportive social network is thought to be our species' most potent modulator of stress, with the best available evidence placing close, disclosive relationships *above and beyond* diet and exercise in determining longevity (Ditzen & Heinrichs, 2014; Steptoe & Kivimäki, 2013; Valtorta et al., 2016) and mental health (Teo et al., 2013; Tunçgenç et al., 2023). In fact, several studies across race, class, and region show that men and boys not only require intimate and emotionally rich bonds but speak clearly about their desire for

them (e.g., McKenzie et al., 2018; Way, 2011). However, most men and boys are not incentivized, or are actively sanctioned, for seeking out intimate closeness among other men (e.g., Oransky & Marecek, 2009). This restrictive environment for bonding is contrasted by the normalization of emotionally rich connections among women. Given this gendered landscape, men's potential reliance on women for a major and potentially nonreciprocated share of their social needs is worthy of theorization, measurement, and exploration.

Despite our and others' claims that persistent struggles with adequate social support in men's networks may lead to potentially burdensome compensation through women (e.g., Vierra et al., 2023), we contend that chronically surface-level male friendships are not ubiquitous or inevitable. Specifically, inclusive masculinities theory (Anderson, 2009; Anderson & McCormack, 2018) asserts that declining homophobia in the United States and United Kingdom is reversing patterns of emotional restrictiveness in male bonds, specifically among young men involved in sports, fraternities, and on YouTube channels (Morris & Anderson, 2015), which may in turn reduce women's emotional labor on men's behalf. Through inclusive masculinities theory, Anderson and colleagues argue that the current era is one of reduced homohysteria, or fear of being perceived as gay, and that more intimacy and gender role flexibility among men, both physically and emotionally, flows from this shift. Anderson's work tends to focus on group activities among younger men, such as within sports teams and fraternities, specifically those that are expressly pluralistic in their welcoming of gay men and men of color. While such groups have power in changing and normalizing certain types of masculinities, the specific contexts in which they have been studied are often paralleled by other research documenting opposing masculinities within the same contexts–for example, fraternities and YouTube personalities that reinforce dominant standards of masculinity (e.g., Haslop et al., 2024).

It remains unclear whether inclusive masculinities are normative outside of expressedly pluralistic male environments, and whether its prevalence has traction in reducing dependence on women in heterosexual men's social networks. As others have noted, the occasional practicing of "softer" masculinities, such as engaging in physical touch with other men and experiencing temporary emotional intimacy within the safe container of a group that disbands after its stated purpose (i.e., the end of a sporting competition, the end of the university fraternity experience), is unlikely to disrupt the distribution of emotional and domestic labor within these men's romantic bonds (e.g., de Boise, 2015; Roberts, 2013). Still, Anderson's research and theorizing makes a vital point: Many men have vibrant and emotionally intimate social networks that contain other men, and not all men "compensate" for thin networks through women's social support. Indeed, when men cultivate close relationships with other men, they are less likely to have mental health difficulties than men who do not form such relationships, and may be less likely to burden women through unequal seeking out of social support (McKenzie et al., 2018).

Linking Men's Thinning Networks to Women's Emotion Work

Taken together, evidence of cross-gender and romantic centrism, along with general thinning of men's networks, is likely to have consequences at the individual, communal, and societal level. Most professionals in mental health services and research tend to focus on the consequences on the individual level by focusing on men. This pursuit should be continued. Yet in the absence of the cultural transformation required to support men's social networks in becoming emotionally robust, thinning social networks are likely to cascade into an expansion of women's intimate and emotional work on behalf of men. However, the idea that women's disproportionate work on men's or a family's behalf is part and parcel of gender inequality is not new.

Feminist researchers have documented the extent of a phenomenon called *emotion work* or *emotional labor*. This work has exposed a primary pathway through which the gender order is produced and reproduced in perpetuity via social relations. Emotion work (England & Farkas, 1986; Erickson, 2005), previously referred to as socioemotional behavior (Levinger, 1964), are activities done to enhance the well-being of one's social ties and facilitate harmony within the relationship, such as that of a romantic partner or child. Emotional labor (Hochschild, 1979, 1983) though it has been taken up in popular culture to mean emotion work, is typically conceptualized in reference to paid or public work and connotes the labor one does to bring their emotional expression in line with prescribed social demands of a given scenario and typically involves emotional suppression (e.g., the performed friendliness of a hotel concierge or airline steward despite frustration with a customer's behavior).

Most people take on some form of emotion work within their familial, platonic, and romantic bonds regardless of gender. Such effort is often appraised by its giver as a freely given expression of care rather than work. Performing emotional work is not "bad," nor is it inherently a site of social inequality: When both partners in a couple exert equal amounts of emotion work, it is associated with relationship satisfaction and other positive relational outcomes (Curran et al., 2015; Holm et al., 2001). Many behaviors qualify as emotion work: listening to a partner describe problems or concerns, arranging a gathering to celebrate a child's birthday, or showing gratitude for a partner could all be subsumed within the definition. It reasons to critique that the term is overly encompassing, given that so many types of behaviors fall under one terminology.

Both emotion work and emotional labor are thought of as culturally feminized forms of labor because of their association with care and nurturance exerted on the behalf of others (Erickson, 1993). Men are largely not thought of as "natural" performers of such labor (Strazdins & Broom, 2004); though most men enact some level of emotion work within their families and relationships. Emotion work is not just femininized but also naturalized, meaning it is thought to be characteristic of women's biological modus operandi within relationships (see Shields et al., 2018, for an extensive review). Men are more likely than women to believe that the behaviors that constitute emotion work are simply part of the normal functioning of a relationship, whereas women are more likely than men to categorize such acts as work (Erickson, 2005). Feminist researchers have made a pointed effort to refer to it as such, challenging such behaviors as effortless and invisible, an important distinction particularly considering that women take on the lion's share of emotion work within relationships and families (Pfeffer, 2010; Strazdins & Broom, 2004; Knudson-Martin and Mahoney, 1998).

It remains unclear which types of emotion work place the heaviest burdens on women. Most studies do not separate emotion work done on the behalf of children from the work done within the heterosexual

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romantic bond. However, emotion work is separate from care work and domestic labor, two highly gendered and persistent features of global patriarchy. In regard to cooking, cleaning, and child care, women undertake nearly three times as many of these tasks than men globally (UN Women, 2020), and inequality in such work has severe negative effects on women's mental and physical health (Blom et al., 2017; see Seedat & Rondon, 2021, for an extensive review). Another separate but related form of unequal work within the family has been conceptualized as kinkeeping by the sociologist Rosenthal (1985), defined as unrecognized relational work done to maintain familial harmony and connection. Remembering to plan a family gathering, assisting family members in staying in touch with one another, or reminding members of other member's birthdays and significant life events are examples of labor typically undertaken by wives and mothers within heterosexual families. The construct's utility is in its identification of work done to assist *another* person in maintaining their own individual relationships, which in turn preserves the quality of the collective relational dynamic. Kinkeeping was theorized in relation to the cohesion of heterosexual nuclear family units; its scope is insufficiently wide in documenting women's disproportionate care on behalf of their partners, sons, or male friends.

Theorizing Mankeeping

Domestic labor, generalized emotion work, and kinkeeping serve important functions in describing how gender inequality is maintained via gender relations in the home and the heterosexual family. These terms are well suited for describing forms of emotion work within a more generalized family context, but they are insufficient in describing labor performed within men's close relationships with women. Mankeeping supplements already existing frameworks within feminist research. We define it as the labor that women take on to shore up losses in men's social networks and reduce the burden of men's isolation on families, the heterosexual bond and other cross-gender bonds, and on men. Mankeeping is best conceived as a mechanism through which women support and bolster men's levels of social support. This theoretical framework is built upon three key postulates that outline the core dynamics of mankeeping: Women tend to (a) provide increased emotional support to men who do not have it elsewhere, (b) perform labor in order to ensure that men receive such support, and (c) experience an emotional and temporal burden as a result of (1) and (2) when emotional support is not equally reciprocated within the relationship. In brief, these postulates are increased emotional support, facilitative labor, and emotional and temporal burden.

Mankeeping behaviors may manifest as women serving as men's sole confidant. For their male friends, boyfriends, husbands, and male family members, women may be faced with increased burdens of listening to, empathizing with, and checking in on men in ways that are not fully reciprocated. A woman might find herself frequently checking in on her husband's emotional state after learning he has had a stressful day at work, while he may not remember her own emotional support needs in return. This may involve helping the husband articulate his own feelings through a process of deciphering limited social and emotional cues, a form of conversational work that the philospher Ellie Anderson calls "hermeneutic labor" (Anderson, 2023). A girlfriend might listen to her boyfriend's worries about his career or family, often without sharing concerns about her own life, reflecting a dynamic where women shoulder the brunt of issues that could otherwise be diffused across a broader range of supportive individuals. A sister may take on the role of a confidant for her brother, listening to his relationship troubles and providing advice while he may not reciprocate the same level of emotional investment. Like the adolescent girls in Borowski and Rose's (2022) study, it is possible that some women listen to the problems of men more than they share their own problems with those men.

Mankeeping can involve curating social interactions on men's behalf. A woman might suggest her husband reconnect with old friends, or a girlfriend might facilitate a group outing to help her boyfriend bond with other men. A mother's suggestion that her son get in contact with his friends qualifies under our definition, along with organizing social functions where the son might meet other boys. Asking men to get in contact with other potentially viable sources of social support—for example, a woman reminding her husband to join a men's group therapy session until he does so—aligns with our definition of mankeeping. Along this same vein, work done to encourage other people to provide support to men is mankeeping, such as a woman who reminds a male friend to reach out to another male friend until the two have scheduled a time to meet. Finally, mankeeping is specifically in reference to emotion work that is not fully reciprocated and potentially burdensome. In this unequal administration social support, we expect that mankeeping comes at a cost, whether that be time, autonomy, or well-being.

Mankeeping as Discrete From Other Forms of Gendered Labor

It is important to note that mankeeping is distinct from, yet interconnected with, traditional concepts of emotion work (e.g., Erickson, 1993). While gendered emotion work typically refers to the emotional support women provide in generalized family contexts, mankeeping is pertinent across a variety of cross-gender contexts. Such work cannot be described as kinkeeping, though it is related. Although the labor we describe is done to help men facilitate deeper social ties, kinkeeping is insufficient in that it too broadly encompasses women's labor on behalf of the entire family unit in making ties with other family members rather than nonkin. Building on both kinkeeping and emotion work, mankeeping distinctly refers to male–female dyadic bonds in which women exert disproportionate effort to shore up losses in men's social networks, and we propose that such labor is done at women's own emotional and temporal expense.

Mankeeping, though widely discussed in the general culture without the particular language or the terminology we propose, is understudied and underacknowledged within the academy. Within the lay population, women sending husbands on "man dates" with other men is not uncommon, a trend parodied in the American television show Saturday Night Live's sketch of a "man park" where women can take their husbands and boyfriends to meet other men (Saturday Night Live, 2021). The idea has also been documented by journalists, including Hamlett's (2019) "Men Have No Friends and Women Bear the Burden." Yet despite a sense of cultural recognition, we found almost no academic work that explores the specific practices women engage in to support men's social networks beyond Wellman's (1992) study of Canadian couples, which found that "women are taking on the burden of maintaining friendships for their

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husbands as well as themselves," and as a result of this increased demand, "working women cut back on friendship relations, one of the few discretionary uses of their time." There are other indications in the empirical record that suggest that women act as key social support figures for men. For example, McKenzie et al.'s (2018) work showed that some men are aware of using male and female friendships for entirely different purposes. As a field, we know incredibly little about how women experience the demands of providing social support to men and how they navigate the challenges associated with it.

Women's Burden in Supporting Men's Social Networks

Although not in specific relation to mankeeping, there is some research supporting the third postulate's assertion that unequal emotion work within romantic or cross-gender relationships has negative effects on women. These effects have been established in three areas: (a) women's experience of the relationship, (b) their mental health, and (c) their time and participation in other activities outside of marriage and family. In partnerships where women put in more emotion work than men, heterosexual marriages are more likely to end in divorce (Duncombe & Marsden, 1993), a finding that complements Strazdins and Broom's (2004) research showing that women, but not men, experience fewer feelings of love and more feelings of conflict in relationships where emotion work was unequal—a burden that Kessler et al. (1985) hypothesized as the "costs of caring." Umberson et al.'s (2020) research with couples suggested that emotion work contributes negatively to the worker's psychological well-being, especially in cases where the person exerting emotional work is a woman on behalf of a man, and in cases where the recipient had existing mental health difficulties, a finding that has been echoed elsewhere (Thomeer et al., 2013). Other scholars have described a similar process conceptualized as unmitigated communion, defined as the "an overfocus on meeting the needs of a partner while excluding one's own needs in the process" (Horne et al., 2020, p. 653), which may share some overlap with mankeeping. Much research has demonstrated unmitigated communion in romantic relationships as a risk factor for poor well-being for the person who excludes their own needs (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998; Horne et al., 2020). Despite the personal cost for one partner, higher rates of unmitigated communion seem to achieve the goal in orchestrating higher levels of relationship satisfaction (Le et al., 2018).

We anticipate that like other forms of emotion work (e.g., Wharton & Erickson, 1995), mankeeping requires time and effort that could confer disadvantages on women's time usage. In our now ongoing data collection designed to test our theory, one Black American woman, 33, reported that she spends a significant amount of time arranging friendship "dates" for her husband, and is always looking for new men that she might pair her husband with so that he might leave the house and form extramarital bonds on a more regular basis. The body of work analogous but not synonymous to mankeeping, along with our initial observations from data collection, underscore women's mankeeping at significant personal cost.

All cross-gender relationships between men and women are possible sites for mankeeping, including relationships between mothers and sons or between male friends and female friends. Its relevance across different types of relationships is likely due to higher levels of psychological safety that men experience in sharing personal problems with women in comparison to men. We suspect that romantic relationships are the primary contexts where mankeeping is enacted, and where it is most burdensome on women, due to ample cultural representations of men's vulnerability that are circumscribed exclusively to heterosexual romantic love (e.g., *Pretty Woman, When Harry Met Sally, In the Mood for Love, A Star Is Born*), and because of previously documented evidence showing that men's romantic connections are often primary figures of social support (e.g., Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; McLaughlin et al., 2010).

Of course, not every heterosexual couple or cross-gender friendship is subject to mankeeping. Indeed, there are many relationships in which men carry out an outsized portion of emotion work on behalf of women and other genders, and many more bonds exist in which such behaviors are equal and mutually gratifying. Yet we present the data on changes in male social networks and its associated mental and physical costs to illustrate the potential scale of the phenomena we discuss. Among men who struggle to create or sustain emotionally nourishing friendships, we suspect higher rates of mankeeping within their cross-gender bonds; the same is suspected among men experiencing mental or physical health decline due to thinning social ties. Women are likely to increase mankeeping behaviors when partnered or otherwise socially connected to men with few close confidants, and to decrease them when men's social needs are met across a diverse range of individuals.

An Agenda for Assessing Mankeeping

We endeavored to examine the consequences of quantity and quality deficits in men's social networks at scale and specifically in relation to women. Although the phenomenon of women's "bridging the gaps" in men's social networks is largely absent and undertheorized, mankeeping may be a crucial yet invisibilized component of gender inequality particularly within advanced economies where the "male friendship recession" and women's emotion work has been well documented. The effects of women's work on men's behalf are certainly intuitive when applied to the gendered division of labor, a well-recognized structural feature of gender-unequal societies. Specifically, women's disproportionate unpaid care work of children and elders, paired with the devaluation of paid forms of feminized labor (e.g., nursing, early childhood education), upholds men's greater economic capital and status (Puzio & Valshtein, 2022). Mankeeping is a form of women's unpaid care work. An important and often overlooked element of gendered social life, the sheer scale of men's thinning social networks is likely to expand the remit of women's unequal labor on behalf of men. It follows that mankeeping is part and parcel of the everyday reproduction of patriarchal social relations.

Evidence of men's thinning social networks, specifically in regard to friendship, has extensive implications across various arms of public life. Like its revised 2018 guidelines describing excessive adherence to masculine norms as a risk factor for poor psychological development, the American Psychological Association should incentivize the creation of new guidelines for the support of men's social networks without women's disproportionate labor (American Psychological Association, 2018). We also require answers to basic questions. Although researchers conducting large survey studies have documented substantial gender differences in social network size and depth of support (i.e., Ipsos Mori via Movember, 2019; Movember, 2018),

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surveys that capture change over a 30-year period are too infrequent. We require regular surveillance of this moving landscape in ways that are stratified beyond just gender. More intersectional research is required to expose raced and classed components of gendered social network formation, for example.

Our theory of mankeeping requires testing. We provide three postulates as starting points from which several research questions flow. Specifically, we stress the following questions as pressing first lines of inquiry, and we provide directional hypotheses for research questions that we expect to be measured quantitatively.

Postulate 1

Women may provide increased emotional support to men who do not have it elsewhere.

Research Question 1: What is the association between the quality or quantity of men's nonromantic social networks and the frequency of women's mankeeping behaviors?

Research Question 2: In which types of cross-gender bonds are mankeeping behaviors most commonly enacted?

Research Question 3: How do women interpret the emotional needs of men with and without strong social networks, and in what particular ways do they respond to these needs?

Research Question 4: How are women's interpretations of the support they offer to men articulated by raced and classed ideas about acceptable forms of men's help seeking?

Hypothesis 1: Men who have a woman who mankeeps in their lives will have more emotionally disclosive same-gender bonds among men. Men who do not have access to a mankeeping woman are less likely to have supportive relationships outside of romance or other close cross-gender bonds.

Hypothesis 2: Mankeeping behaviors are most common in romantic cross-gender bonds, though mankeeping is present within other types of cross-gender dyads: mothers and sons, male friends and female friends, etc.

Postulate 2

Women perform labor in order to help the men receive such support.

Research Question 1: Do men and women differ in their amount of labor to support each other's social networks, either in quantity or quality of support?

Research Question 2: What specific tasks do women take on in the support of men's social networks?

Research Question 3: Emotional responses to women's facilitation of men's mental health and social networks may vary from gratitude, apathy, threat, to guilt. What are men's experiences of receiving women's support of their social networks?

Hypothesis 1: Women spend more time supporting men's social networks than the reverse.

Hypothesis 2: Arranging, facilitating, and encouraging men's social interactions are among the most frequent mankeeping behaviors.

Postulate 3

Women experience an emotional and temporal burden as a result of (1) and (2) when the administration of this labor is not equally reciprocated.

Research Question 1: What is the association between mankeeping behaviors and women's psychological distress and relationship satisfaction?

Research Question 2: What is the effect of mankeeping on women's leisure time?

Research Question 3: How do women understand and make meaning of the personal effects of engaging in mankeeping?

Hypothesis 1: Mankeeping behaviors are associated with women's psychological distress and relationship dissatisfaction.

Hypothesis 2: Mankeeping behaviors cause a decrease in women's well-being and available leisure time.

Beyond these research aims, there is exciting progress coming from programs that deliberately put men in dialogue with other men about the conditions of their lives (i.e., Ríos-González et al., 2021). Such work allows men to meet their social and emotional needs without creating new forms of emotion work for women. In the United Kingdom and United States, a growing trend of "men's circles" attempt to fill gaps in men's social networks while breaking down the barriers that masculine norms pose to the formation of extramarital bonds. MensGroup, Men's Circle, Beyond Equality, and EVRYMAN, are among the groups attempting to bring men together in social spaces without the expectation of an explicit masculine activity, though the growing "Men's Sheds" movement attempts to bring men together to talk while engaging in a masculine building activity. Several of these groups specifically encourage men to participate in, and learn how to respond to, emotional disclosure with other men while critiquing patriarchy as a primary source of male strife and exposing women's negative experiences with men who endorse dominant forms of masculinity. We believe these initiatives should be funded at higher levels and at a wider scale.

It is also important that government agencies concerned with loneliness recognize the gendered phenomena of their remit by creating initiatives and allocating resources to understanding the gendered reality of social isolation. We recognize, too, that social isolation is not exclusively male. Incentives that facilitate social connection more broadly, like tax benefits for living with or caring for friends, and the maintenance of social infrastructure that encourages impromptu and regular social interaction, are positioned to reduce social isolation more generally (e.g., Leib, 2007).

As social infrastructural decline continues throughout rich industrialized economies, more advocacy and community outreach will be required to address men's vulnerability to social network deterioration. This effort must be careful not to create male spaces that reproduce men's social dominance in ways that university fraternities and other men's social clubs have long helped facilitate (e.g., Seabrook et al., 2018). There is of course variation in the degree to which formalized

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men's spaces have reinforced gender inequality in their communities. For example, British working men's clubs, though now in severe decline, have served as spaces of working-class solidarity and community building while also further instantiating misogynist beliefs and behaviours among members (Hall, 2017). Similarly, scholars have described the sanctity and importance of the barbershop, specifically for Black men, in forming deep relationships and forging community resistance against anti-Black racism (Alexander, 2003; Shabazz, 2016), Other researchers show how men-only spaces can be safe forums for men to air out sexist beliefs (see Barber, 2008). More research with existing emotionally supportive male-centric communities are needed. For example, online servers such as Discord have become increasingly common technologies of social support among young men in particular, with many men maintaining long-term digital friendships via the platform. Fostering men's substantive interaction with other men in ways that are characterized by care, disclosure, and affection is critical—such as what is being attempted through men's circles that explicitly critique masculine norms rather than creating environments where hegemonic male power can be reproduced.

Limitations on Generalizability

We have stressed that impoverished male networks are not a globally ubiquitous cultural phenomenon, nor is mankeeping a feature of all heterosexual or cross-gender relationships. Extensive and close networks among men are indeed common in some places, though many scholars have warned that male bonding and public camaraderie can exclude women from public life, potentially exacerbating other gendered divisions of labor (see Osella, 2012; Şahin, 2018, for two discussions related to South India and Istanbul). The empirical evidence we draw on to support the argumentation in this article has significant restraints: It is overwhelmingly Western, specifically in regard to the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Western Europe. When there were exceptions to this geographical narrowness, such research was still exceedingly representative of rich, globalized economies. To our knowledge, census-level data documenting gendered features of social networks outside of the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia is not yet widespread.

Our focus has been overwhelmingly on heterosexual, cisgender men. There is some evidence (Pfeffer, 2010) to suggest that transgender men adopt gendered norms around domestic and emotion work with their female partners, though this is a nascent area of inquiry. Much more research is needed to understand if and how our conceptualization of mankeeping applies to transmen, gay men, and queer men, all of whom have relationships with women in various configurations of familial, platonic, and romantic capacities. While these men may not be "exempt" from struggles with friendship and subsequent effects on women, it is possible that men who are regarded as transgressors of dominant forms of masculinity may be more aware of if and how they give rise to women's emotion work. While we relied on evidence that samples racially and socioeconomically diverse populations wherever possible, many studies fell short in regard to this necessary diversity.

Like Way et al. (2014) described, dominant norms of masculinity are culturally and economically situated within an overall White-supremacist social hierarchy. Certain communities have more stringent expectations toward masculinity, whereas others encourage considerable flexibility. In Way's (2011) work, boys from Dominican and Puerto-Rican immigrant families were more likely to maintain close and large social networks with other boys due to proximity to ideals of masculinity that included affection with, and closeness to, other boys and men. Incorporating an intersectionality framework into our mankeeping theory would significantly enhance our understanding of the complexities surrounding emotion work and social networks. For instance, the degree that women are willing to provide intimate social support is highly dependent on culture and context. An intersectional approach can illuminate how men's needs for social support are expressed differently based on race and class, affecting how they engage with and rely on women for emotional support.

Conclusion: Expanding Men's Networks, Reducing Women's Labor

Social isolation appears to be on the rise in many parts of the world and in ways that are consistently gendered. In light of women's generally thicker and deeper wellsprings of social support, along with the indisputable link between such support and health, our field must better understand what changes in social networks mean for women and gender equality. To conceptualize men's thinner social networks as a mere symptom of gender inequality, or a "male issue," rather than a structural component of how patriarchy is upheld and reproduced, is to miss a critical avenue for social change. Our concept of *mankeeping* presents one mechanism through which men's social isolation could reproduce existing inequalities, though there may be other mechanisms. For example, men's isolation may also serve to strengthen the pull toward groups that offer men and boys the promise of community while feeding into motives (see Carian, 2022, for an example regarding men's rights groups).

Friendship and community defined beyond the romantic dyad are vital components of human thriving. We look to a future where boys and men can create and sustain connection in ways that are unencumbered by rigid masculine norms, and where the meeting of men's social and emotional needs does not depend on women's unpaid and unequal care work. A wave of renewed focus on men's changing social networks and women's experiences in relation to these changes is required to get us there.

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